

Sermon for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 2:18-24; Mark 10:2-9

I walked in the woods this gloriously bright autumn; and the thought occurred to me that it is not only that God has created all this beauty, but that God is in it -- in all of its glory. And in all of its tragedy, too, for there is a death in autumn. I thought as I walked that in some powerful and mysterious way, I was walking "in God" -- surrounded, embraced and absorbed in God.

Caution is in order: It is easy to jump to the idea that God and nature are one and the same. The creation is not the Creator. Nature points to something infinitely greater. The Psalm says, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork."

There is a poem by Wordsworth that I was once required to memorize. It is called "Flower in the Crannied Wall."

*Flower in the crannied wall, I pluck you out of the crannies.
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand.
Little flower --if I could understand what you are, root and all and all in
all,
Then I would know what God and man is.*

People argue, sometimes bitterly, about the book of Genesis -- whether it is a literal description of how all things came to be. Or whether it is a story contrived by a pre-scientific people to provide some sort of answers to questions that humans have always asked, but questions to which we now have factual answers or fact-based theories.

Both parties to the argument miss the point. The Bible stories of creation are not about science, they are about relationships. There is this marvelous tapestry, this great interweaving of relationships: God with creation, with nature, God to humankind and the response of humanity to God. There is the relationship of human beings to the natural world, to know it to learn about it, to use it for good things, to use it for our nourishment and enjoyment, and above all to care for it responsibly as a trust from God.

And at the very center of it all is the relationship of human beings to each other, the human family, man and woman, in all the mystery and complexity of those

relationships and responsibilities. It is all tied together in this glorious tapestry of life.

At every point, the hallmark of all these relationships: man-god, man-woman, man-nature the hallmark is mutual responsibility, trust and love.

These things I thought as I walked in the golden woods.

The Gospel picks up the same theme. A Pharisee asked if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. It was a good rabbinical question and Jesus turned the question back on the questioner. “What is the law of Moses on the issue? What does the Torah say?” Well, it says that a man may write his wife a bill of divorce and put her away. But then Jesus turned the issue right around and made it a question, not of law, but of relationships. And he went on to quote the Book of Genesis, the very text that we have in front of us: “From the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason, a man must leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife. “Therefore,” he said, “what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

I resonated with this gospel lesson especially, and especially right now. Most of you know that two weeks ago I traveled to Michigan to officiate at the wedding of my oldest grandson. It was particularly moving for me because twenty-three and a half years earlier I had taken part in his Roman Catholic baptism. Not only that, but twenty-six years and one day earlier, I had shared in the wedding of his parents, likewise a Catholic ceremony.

That earlier wedding was something of a circus, because before my son and their priest had asked me to share in the ceremony and set the date, I had already agreed to officiate at another wedding the same day! It involved some fast moves and some expensive transportation, but it worked. The point I want to make has to do with that other wedding, the one outside my family.

The bride and groom asked for the traditional ceremony, but with one change. Instead of saying, “. . .As long as we both shall live,” they asked that the vows be, “. . .As long as we both shall love.” “Well,” I said, “we need to talk about that!” It was a fine, romantic idea, but I refused. I told that young couple, deeply in love and as certain as can be that their marriage would last forever, that if they vowed to be husband and wife “so long as they both shall love” it would leave a serious loophole. Who is to decide when love ceases? Show me

the marriage that has never had its moments of doubt!

What I told them, and what I told my grandson and his lovely bride, is that it is the marriage commitment that keeps love alive, not love that keeps the marriage alive.

It is all a matter of relationships. So it was in the beginning, and so it is in the teachings of Jesus. The love that is from God, the love that Jesus lived and proclaimed -- That love is more than simple human affection. It has in it the strong components of trust and responsibility -- the very qualities that were present in the creation of the world and the establishment of the human family. Trust and responsibility: the strength and support that makes love possible and sustains the seamless web of life in whatever setting we want to imagine it.

I thought of all these things as I walked in the woods in the midst of this autumn glory. I thought of this holy sacrament that is the sign of God's promises to us and a renewal of our obedience to him. It affirms the covenant of trust and responsibility and never-failing love sealed in the life and death and resurrection of Christ.

I walked in those golden woods; now fading, but with the faithful promise of a season of rest and then another springtime. And putting aside all these distracting words, I thought only of the all-enfolding presence of God. You might even call it prayer.

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